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NOEL BURCH

A Conversation with Alain Resnais

Writing about the work of Alain Resnais in previous issues of FILM QUARTERLY, Noel Burch suggested that he is perhaps the most promising new talent to have appeared in the French cinema in recent years. His shorts displayed a startling visual sense and his first feature, HIROSHIMA, MON AMOUR, is by all reports a film of stunning verve and authority. It is to be hoped that it will soon make an appearance in this country.*

We met for a drink in Harry's New York Bar, near the Opéra. The place is always deserted at that time of the afternoon and is convenient for conversation. Resnais is a shy, rather nervous young man. I began by asking him about his short-subjects: how he felt about them and how he felt about shorts in general. The chief point he seemed to want to make was that, practically speaking, it is much harder to make a good short than a good feature. "Say I'm shooting a feature in this bar. If I want a tall, skinny barman and a dozen extras, somebody is immediately sent to fetch them. But if I'm doing a short, the producer will hem and haw and I'll be lucky to have anyone in the shot at all. Shorts simply aren't worth the effort, either aesthetically or financially. *Le Chant du Styphène*, for example, took five days longer to shoot than *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, and of course I was paid infinitely less to direct it." Still and all, he does have serious consideration for his past shorts, and distinct preferences among them. His best, he feels, was *Nuit et Brouillard*, and this independently of its subject matter (concentration-camp atrocities). In particular, he feels it was in this film that he came closest to solving the problem of commentary—a prob-

lem which we were to touch upon again in connection with *Hiroshima*. Resnais does not like the commentary for *Toute la Mémoire du Monde* at all, on the other hand, and in fact tends to feel that both of his last shorts were stylistic exercises more than anything else: "Polysterene just happened to be the most amusing subject proposed to me at a time when I needed money."

As he did not seem especially anxious to discuss his shorts further, I went on to ask about *Hiroshima*: what, to his mind, is the meaning of the juxtaposition of the two main story-themes in that film? He had obviously been asked that question before, but I did not feel that I was getting a stock answer when he told me, very simply, that for him these themes had no rigorous relationship at all. He had chosen them quite intuitively, "the way a composer might choose two chords." "There are things in everyday life which arrest one's attention, which seem to go together, the way words rhyme in a poem." This was the first of many allusions to an abstract conception of films which seems constantly present in his mind. But then, as if to satisfy another side of himself, he went on to talk about the importance of making people feel the hor-

* "Four French Documentaries," Fall 1959; "Qu'est-ce que la Nouvelle Vague?" Winter 1959.

ror of war and the atom bomb by showing how these phenomena can seep through into one's most private existence. "People think they can lay low [*se planquer*] but they soon realize they can't." Returning to a more formal vocabulary he spoke of "a macrocosm and microcosm" of suffering, a "funnel-shape structure, moving from the infinitely vast to the infinitely small." When I asked him what the film's last line meant—"You are Nevers, I am Hiroshima"—he was even more vague; for him it was merely a way of conveying the nostalgia of two lovers destined to be separated. "But then of course Marguerite may have had something else in mind." When I suggested that here and elsewhere in the film there was an atmosphere of "significance" which seemed to bely this simplicity, he allowed I might be right and implied he had heard the criticism before. In connection with Marguerite Duras' much-discussed commentary, he felt that the critics and intellectuals had largely missed the point; they had compared the film's verbal style to Péguy's, whereas Resnais feels that a comparison with Hemingway's attitude towards words would have been closer to the mark. Again he speaks of music, of words being used as "emotional notes" rather than for their literal meaning; he feels that the film's success in general distribution in Paris is a sign that the ordinary spectator is better prepared to accept this incantatory use of words than the Champs-Elysées snob. A surprising observation about *Hiroshima* came in respect to the peace-parade sequence. I asked him whether, as some of my friends had felt, this sequence was meant to be ironic. Misconstruing the question, he answered: "Yes, I suppose it was a bit meagre. But we simply couldn't get people to turn out. I would call the sequence nostalgic—nostalgic with respect to the really grandiose film against the bomb that ought to be made. After all, that's the only thing that really counts, demonstrating against the H-Bomb," and we went on whimsically to imagine a kind of *Triumphant of the Will* shot around an anti-H-Bomb demonstration. This, I'm afraid, was as close as we ever came to discussing Resnais' politics.

I wanted to return at this point to a passing

remark he had made earlier. Referring to "the direction in which he was striving to work," to his "experiments" and "attempts," he said: "When one thinks of the stage of development that painting has reached . . . !" Resnais, it turned out, has always been keenly interested in painting. When he came to Paris, just after the Liberation in 1944, he was "just a country boy" and the idea of meeting "a real-life painter" held a marvelous prestige for him. This was why he began making little 16mm films about the works of modern painters, among them Max Ernst. A producer got wind of these films and without ever having seen one commissioned Resnais to do his first real film: *Van Gogh*. As in every artistic domain, Resnais' taste in painting is highly eclectic: "I like what I call theatrical painting—Piero della Francesca, Félix Vallotton, Paul Delvaux, etc. But then I also like Hartung. My favorite modern painter is Ernst; he satisfies me on both the theatrical and abstract levels. . . . There is nothing like looking at a painter's work through a camera view-finder to judge the cohesiveness of his painting as such. That was how I came to see through Gauguin, for example—he just didn't stand up—but it's also how I came to appreciate the formal values of Ernst." In connection with this synthesis of the theatrical and the abstract in the paintings of Ernst, we finally came to what may well be the most meaningful question one can ask Alain Resnais: how does he propose to reconcile the highly abstract attitude displayed in his films—and confirmed in the course of our conversation—with the highly concrete emotional and intellectual communication for which he also expressed great concern? He is obviously aware how crucial this problem is, and knows that he is still a long way from the answer. He is tempted by solutions involving extreme heterogeneity, films which would leap from pure, graphic abstractions to documentary realism and which would even incorporate stretches of "non-cinema." "One cannot do away with the image completely—Gance tried this in the sound version of *J'Accuse*, but the spectator's mind begins to wander when a film is turned into a radio broadcast for any length of time. Still, one can

reduce the image to a mere focal point for the audience's eye, for example the clouds and other abstract patterns in Welles' Shakespearean films or the cross at the end of *Le Journal d'un Curé de Campagne*."

This led to a discussion of films in general, and here again Resnais' tastes are exceedingly eclectic. He admires Bresson tremendously, feels that certain scenes in his recent *Pickpocket* "go very far," but is naturally irritated by the Christian aspects of the film. He adores Renoir, placing *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* on a par with *La Régule du Jeu*—and he subscribes to Renoir's theories on the autonomy of the actor and "spontaneous" directing. Other men cited included Fellini ("all Fellini, pasted end to end and run off at one sitting, with the sequences not necessarily in the right order; even if there's God in it, I don't mind so long as it's Fellini who's telling me the story"); Buñuel ("*Je l'aime pour son culte de l'amour et pour sa générosité*" —a modern French catch-word which is best translated as "humanitarianism"; his favorite Buñuel film is *L'Age d'Or* and he was to acknowledge his debt to Surrealism at several points in the conversation); Antonioni; Visconti; and Welles—but also Howard Hawks, one of those inexplicable favorites of French movie addicts. Resnais loves the old serials ("Feuillade," we agreed, "was a very great man") and even likes the sort of thing Lang is doing today in that vein: "*The Bengal Tiger* isn't as good as *Mabuse*, of course, but it still gives me a kick." I asked him if any films can be said to have influenced or inspired him in any way. He answered that as far as influences were concerned he had always considered himself as pottering away on the fringe ["*un bricoleur en marge*"] and then, after a moment's reflection, he said that there *was* one kind of film that had always made him want to make movies: the American musical comedy! (Donen, Minnelli, Kelly, etc.)

Resnais was very reluctant to discuss his future plans. He admitted that he was having three scripts written for him at the present time (he never wants to adapt any pre-existing work, scruples at touching anything which already has

its definitive form) but doesn't seem too enthusiastic about the fact. He seems to have a strong inferiority complex about "not knowing grammar," as he puts it, or in other words about having no literary flair in a country where every school boy is supposed to be able to write like Madame de Sévigné. Also, this is the first time he has ever been in a position to *choose* his own subject matter. (Even *Hiroshima* was a commissioned film at the outset: a Franco-Japanese co-production *had* to be made, and it *had* to be set in Hiroshima.) He finds himself somewhat at a loss. Since our conversation, however, I have learned from a mutual friend about Resnais' fondest project, one which ties in rather nicely with his considerations on heterogeneity, Surrealist painting and Feuillade's serials. It is based upon a comic strip which appeared in Holland during the early 'thirties and told of the amazing, picaresque adventures of a certain Harry Nixon. The film is to be a vast, lavish, fresco-like serial, involving the wildest kind of *fin de siècle* science fiction, with sets to be designed by Paul Delvaux. Unfortunately it is such a costly venture (the figure quoted was a million dollars) that it is doubtful that the film can be produced for some time to come, despite Resnais' current prestige. In a work of this sort, however, Resnais would doubtless resolve the intellectual and aesthetic problems he confronted in *Hiroshima*.

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